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THE STATECRAFT OF LEE KUAN YEW, VISIONARY AND OPPORTUNIST

CORE COURSE ONE ESSAY

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The Statecraft of Lee Kuan Yew, Visionary and Opportunist

As the bus marked "Malaysian Federation" cruised along the roadway of world relations, the driver stopped, turned to one of the passengers and stated, "Hey fella, this is where you get off " "Not so," replied the passenger, Lee Kuan Yew, "Singapore intends to continue to ride along as part of the federation created with Malaysia, Sarawak and Sabah--we have no plans for getting off " "Too bad," retorted the Federation driver "You are out here and on your own "

In 1959, Singapore gained its autonomy within the British Commonwealth and shortly thereafter, in 1963, joined the Federation of Malaysia. While not quite as abrupt as the above scenario, the Federation ouster of Singapore (effective August 9, 1965) over social and political concerns, including Singapore's rising dominance, confronted Singapore's Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew (hereinafter referred to as "Lee"), with a monumental challenge. National survival of Singapore was clearly at stake. As Singapore's leading statesman, Lee responded by developing and implementing a comprehensive "roadmap" or vision of Singapore's future in which the country evolved quickly into an economically self-sufficient, society capable of competing and surviving in the worldwide economy. The end or goal was clear, but a paucity of resources made the means of achieving it difficult to perceive. Lee's skill (and luck) as a statesman was instrumental in achieving his strategic goals and is evidenced by Singapore's conversion from an emerging colonial state into a viable nation and economic marvel.

OBJECTIVES

Lee's strategic vision had to encompass a multitude of tasks and nearly insurmountable challenges involved in the development of a new nation, almost from "ground zero ". His vision focused on three primary areas or objectives:

Developing economic capabilities which would sustain a viable Singapore

Clearly the most critical of Lee's challenges was the need to recast and energize Singapore's economy into one which would sustain the state. Prior significant trading ties with the

Malaysian Federation cooled in the period following separation. British interests, a residual from colonial days, totaled 70% of foreign investment and were jeopardized by the growing sentiment in Great Britain to withdraw from its Singaporean bases (and with it a substantial portion of its annual contribution of over 25% of Singapore's gross national product). Clearly, the nation could not survive with such substantial dependence on two limited trading partners and a largely undeveloped industrial base.

Creating national cohesion.

While all of Lee's tasks were daunting, fostering a cohesive Singaporean identity took significant ingenuity. Faced with a multi-cultural population (80% Chinese, 16% Malay, 4% Indian and Eurasian) which was supportive but not clearly unified, he needed to mold that identity while remaining sensitive to the diverse cultural backgrounds of these groups. He clearly recognized that the road to sustainable nationhood would require cooperation (and minimum friction) from the entire populace, a willingness to pull together in the face of adversity and to sacrifice in the short-term for longer-term gains. The sensitivity of Lee and his lieutenants to this problem is evident in their careful cultivation of a variety of initiatives.

Providing for national defense.

Singapore occupied a highly desirable location along major shipping lanes and offered valuable port facilities to whoever controlled her. The country was literally an island of largely Chinese population in a region of Muslim domination. Warding off any interested in subjugating the infant nation was the last of Lee's vital objectives.

With the myriad of challenges confronting him, Lee recognized that while there could be some prioritization among objectives, he needed to work many issues simultaneously. Part of the genius which Lee brought to the task was ability to "interweave" within the means he adopted steps which helped achieve multiple and not necessarily directly related benefits toward his desired ends.

STRENGTHS

As Lee sat on the curbside (figuratively) and took stock of the elements of national power Singapore could bring to bear on the task ahead, he recognized Singapore's latent or potential power lay almost entirely in just two factors—her strategic location and her people. The following additional factors (and in some cases what I have described as “fortuities”) favored Lee's efforts.

The character of the people of Singapore gave Lee a general ethic of thrift, self-sacrifice, strict discipline and a strong commitment to family. These were characteristics Lee needed to foster to achieve his vision for Singapore.

The parliamentary set-up adopted (and widely accepted) shortly after leaving the Commonwealth was easily converted to serve the needs of an independent nation, thereby avoiding protracted debate and decision over the form of government.

The concessions and cooperation of the Singaporean population essential to effecting (and tolerating) changes were possible only if political challenges were minimized. “Fortuity” favored Lee in that while culturally divided, Singapore was not substantially politically divided. His party, the Peoples Action Party (PAP) held popular support as a result of efforts prior to separation. Rival parties had lost influence due to their stands on the independence issue.

While Singapore did not enjoy the best relations with its Muslim neighbors, during the formative years (mid-1960s and early 1970s) it had no imminent substantial external threats. There was no present substantial threat of Communist takeover in the region. In the late 1960s, the continued presence of the British provided a deterrent umbrella under which Singapore and its defense force could evolve.

The British contributions to Singapore's economy during the first few years following separation providing a cushion for development. The British legacy later translated into a veritable windfall of substantial assets which Singapore could add to Lee's vision of a shipping center.

Singapore's assets or strengths at this point also included the sheer force of Lee's personality. Driven and involved in nearly every aspect of Singapore's efforts, he pushed, pulled, prodded, cajoled and commanded Singapore into its new shape. He saw opportunities and maximized them, demonstrated flexibility to change and a willingness to press on in the face of uncertainty.

WEAKNESSES

At the same time, Lee faced the following significant challenges to redirecting Singapore's power into the creation and sustainment of a viable nation:

As noted, the economy was not developed and could not compete in world markets.

Singapore lacked a substantial capital base on which to build industry.

As a small island nation, Singapore had no appreciable natural resources it could draw upon to stimulate export trade. Additionally, there was little land in which to develop (including surrounding small islands).

Singapore relied on others for water and was barely able to sustain itself agriculturally.

Singapore's populace lacked the homogenizing factor of a common language and differences in color, culture, and religion were natural barriers.

An island of Chinese within a Muslim region, Singapore was the subject of regional mistrust and lacked supportive alliances.

Standing alone Singapore had no real ability to defend itself militarily from external threats.

All told, Lee faced a formidable challenge, one many thought impossible. It is in the orchestration of limited resources and the exploitation of opportunity that Lee's genius shines--although not necessarily in a fashion acceptable to all.

INSTRUMENTS USED/ORCHESTRATION

Recognizing the severe limitations constraining the means available to achieve his grand strategy, Lee concluded that government control and involvement in nearly every facet of

Singapore's development was essential. Policies and actions instituted in the name of social order would clearly push the limits of commonly-held perceptions of the prerogatives of the government in a democratic society. No doubt at various points Lee had to gauge just how far his government could go in its authoritarian positions and economic involvements without either fomenting self-destructive domestic unrest or being ostracized by the nations upon whom Singapore relied so heavily for her economic development. Success in walking this "fine line" exemplified his skill as a statesman. He knew when to draw the line and how to draw upon his well-cultivated image of a man of high personal integrity and the leader of a "democratic nation" to stave off detractors.

Having chosen heavy government involvement, Lee moved to expand and solidify PAP's political advantage. The Prime Minister's role as overseer of both domestic and foreign policy, along with his ability to choose the Council of Ministers, allowed Lee to position a small cadre of advisors and retain tight control over government action. Drawing upon the weakness of political adversaries, popular support arising from past successes, and "tools" available within the government (including government control of the media and progressively restrictive stances on the expression of dissent), PAP's effort culminated in the 1968 electoral mandate by which it obtained control of every seat in the Parliament. Effectively Lee had unopposed domestic authority.

Political dominance was but an intermediary "end" sought by Lee, it became the "means" for implementing other steps essential to his vision, the springboard for swiftly addressing other challenges. While Singapore's economy was growing during the time Lee consolidated his position, labor unrest was a concern, particularly as it would adversely impact Lee's vision of creating an economy which was attractive to much-needed capital investment. The Trade Union Act of 1968 is heralded as putting to an end major concerns over labor and expediting Singapore's economic expansion. Its provisions restricted trade union disputes, prevented strikes and greatly increased employer powers over employees, including working hours. The initial shock of the unions over the sweeping control given employers soon dissipated as they accepted the need for

such controls if the nation's growth was to continue—perhaps evidence of growing success of Lee's efforts at national cohesion

Resolution (at least for the moment) of labor discipline problems freed Lee's government to entice domestic and foreign investment in Singapore. Lee recognized that the lack of native capital necessitated government involvement to stimulate economic growth. Transnational corporations were enticed by the population resource (a disciplined labor force) and tax concessions in a wise trade-off for an influx of equipment and managerial and marketing skills. He did not hesitate to invest some of Singapore's limited economic resources, a fledgling instrument of national power, to provide long-term financing of a variety of essential industries or to prompt local industry by taking significant minority equity positions. The pay-off was worth the investment.

Lee's approach to land reform similarly displayed his ability to achieve multiple benefits out of single efforts. Residents in marginal housing were moved to government-built high-rise buildings where low-cost government loans allowed them to become "homeowners" (with a stake in Singapore's future). The vacated land was turned over to critical development needs.

Aptly perceiving social stability as crucial to inducing both domestic, but most particularly international trade, Lee pushed through Parliament a wide range of measures to "preserve order." This social control legislation impinged on a number of individual rights (e.g. the abolition of the right to trial by a jury) but yielded a docile community. As a further inducement to international trading and development of Singapore as a regional center for financial matters, the government approved both the creation of and its joint ownership interest in the International Trading Company. Again, the "investment" in a controlled labor force and stable domestic situation paid big dividends as investment and growth rates were outstanding.

Lee masterfully drew opportunity out of the clouds of adversity raised by Great Britain's decision to withdraw from Singapore by 1971. Not only was the British departure used by Lee as a "common challenge" around which to rally the Singaporean populace (thereby further cementing

national unity), but also Lee envisioned use of the substantial shipyard facilities garnered from the British as a "target area" for industrial diversification. Addition of these assets bolstered efforts to draw on the value of Singapore's geographic location to develop a world-class shipping industry. Similarly, he opportunistically drew upon early Indonesian oil exploration ventures and United States needs during the Vietnam conflict to further Singapore's economic well-being.

Lee long believed education was critical to national success. He viewed the schools as integral to inculcating values essential to national cohesion and had great personal interest and involvement in their operations. Lee's government anticipated need and by upgrading educational system to produce a technically trained population was ready to sustain a "second wave" of Singaporean industrial growth.

During this time of nation-building, Singapore wisely pursued a general policy of international non-alignment. Lee was keenly aware that his nation could not allow itself to be drawn into regional conflicts, it needed to focus its resources and energies inwardly. At the same time, Lee was inclined to establish friendly relations and trading links without grave concern over ideology; alliances were avoided. Singapore's nationalistic fervor at times grated on its neighbors, and it was not until the early 1970s that significant efforts were taken to patch up relations with Malaysia and Indonesia. These problems never challenged the pursuit of Lee's goals.

While national defense was not the most vital of interests, its importance to Singapore's development should not be underplayed. Here again, "fortuity" allowed Singapore to develop free of imminent political and military threats and avoid devotion of a significant portion of its energies to national defense. Using the Israeli model for the self-defense force, Lee instituted compulsory national service for all males not only as a means of ensuring a ready manpower pool for the defense force, but also it was yet another means of instilling national loyalties.

Across the board, Singapore benefited from a variety of favorable circumstances during its infancy. Lee's total involvement in making and maximizing opportunities is evident as the

government and people of Singapore struggled toward the goal of nationhood and economic well-being. The question then becomes how do we judge his success.

RESULTS/CONCLUSION

By many measures, Lee's efforts were a unqualified success, and the envy of many. Singapore's status as one of the world's largest seaports, prominence as a regional capital market and center for finance, and high per capita income and low unemployment underscore the extent of his success.

Based on these circumstances one can argue that Lee achieved his strategic vision, at least regarding economic independence and modest national defense. But the analysis can not end there. Do Lee's achievements have to be capable of duplication elsewhere in order to be deemed a success? I submit they do not. Lee made the most of limited resources and opportunities, including the "fortuities," which were presented to Singapore. Those circumstances which drove his decisionmaking and the "fortuities" from which he benefited are unlikely to recur. That he was so successful in capitalizing on events as they unfolded attests to his personal ability to comprehend and seize opportunity and to fashion effective programs and policies. They underscore that he was both (to use a non-technical term) lucky and adept at his version of nationbuilding. To his credit, he made a viable nation out of very little.

At the same time, it is hard to believe Lee could have achieved the same goals without an "firm, involved" (authoritarian) government and that his achievements were not made without social costs. By "world standards," one could argue Lee's success was bought by using (abusing?) his people. While we might judge him as personally successful, his means may have sowed the seeds of future problems (social discontent and unwillingness to accept authoritarian rule). The period of Singapore's infancy may go down in the history books as Lee Kuan Yew's big success, but perhaps he has left his followers without the political and cultural wherewithal to sustain these achievements. I submit that on this point the jury is still out.

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